

Leading social impact organizations

Insights from today's leaders

Heidrick & Struggles' Social Impact Practice recently convened a discussion on career paths and crucial skills for leaders in corporate social responsibility and philanthropy with four senior executives. We offer some insights from the discussion below, followed by our perspective on helping nonprofit, social enterprise, and educational institutions find the leaders they need to accomplish their missions.

The executives who participated in the discussion were:

Jenni Luke
Vice President of
Community Impact at the
San Francisco 49ers

Catharine Grimes
Director, Bristol Myers
Squibb Foundation

Arlene Isaacs-Lowe
Global Head of Corporate
Social Responsibility for
Moody's Corporation,
President of the Moody's
Foundation

Jen Crozier
Former President of
Corporate Citizenship
and of the IBM
Foundation

Varied paths to social impact leadership



Luke

I started my career as a lawyer. I was always really interested in social justice issues, so that's kind of the through line in my career, but I've done it in a couple different ways. I started practicing law, and then I took a pivot and did entertainment for about five years. I represented writers and directors for film and television before I really found my niche in the nonprofit world. I spent the last 15 years working in direct service programs for the community. And now I'm on the inside with the 49ers.



Isaacs-Lowe

I've been with Moody's for over 20 years, and actually started as a credit analyst in the rating agency. And then I ran the business for the rating agency on the commercial side for our financial institutions, project finance, and public finance team in the US and then in Europe, the Middle East and Africa. It was in that assignment that it became clear to me that corporate social responsibility was evolving to mean more than philanthropy and employee engagement, that it was taking on a much more strategic imperative for organizations. From a commercial perspective, I began to observe that many of our customers and clients in EMEA were beginning to ask questions about our values, before determining whether or not they were going to do business with us. I was asked if I'd consider becoming the president of the foundation and my response was if they were willing to consider an overarching and enterprise-wide corporate social responsibility function, I'd be interested.



Grimes

Like Arlene, I've been at Bristol Myers Squibb over 20 years. I started as a sales representative, coming from being a CPA at Arthur Andersen. I was a tax accountant in Houston during the Enron days so after surviving that I was really looking for more meaning in my work, and some work that had more of a human touch than dealing with numbers all day. I worked my way up, and I moved over to the foundation in 2010.



Crozier

I spent the last 22 years at IBM in a variety of roles: marketing, communications, public policy, and ultimately Corporate Citizenship. There I had the opportunity to build programs that harnessed IBM's talent and technology to address major social challenges in healthcare, education, disaster response, and more. Ultimately, I became the head of the global Citizenship function and President of the IBM Foundation.

Crucial skills for social impact leaders



Crozier

The transformation and the volume of people in the field means there does need to be rigor, and it can't just be the thing that you get to do at the end of your career because you're really good at whatever you did and you're not ready to retire yet. I would say we crave people who have studied social impact, who really understand the community needs, people who know how to do very crisp measurement of stuff that is really hard to measure.

But for every one of those people, you also need a person who really understands the critical mission of the business and how we make sure what we're doing is aligned with the business and not a distraction from it. Overall, it's the total composition of the team that is important. Having a diversity of experiences, perspectives, skills and networks will strengthen the impact of the work.



Luke

A lot of the challenges that I see in having run direct service organizations for the last 15 years is the integration point between the 501(c)(3) side and the corporate side. There's so much more similarity than there is difference. There are important differences, but you still have to run it as a business. And I think the relative seat at the table that you get is about making sure you're a vital part of the core conversations of the business. That's tough to do if you don't understand the language of business and you don't understand the language of the industry that you're in, and you're not making an effort to do those sort of internal learnings.

For folks who are really motivated by doing the direct service work and the core delivery on the ground, which I certainly have been, it is imperative that you also learn the business side of how your nonprofit is structured and take advantage of understanding all of these pieces. You can be the most passionate advocate for something in the world, but if you speak it in a way that doesn't invite people into the conversation, it doesn't go anywhere. These are complex organizations – and you're dealing with complexity in the community. There's just complexity everywhere, and you've got to be able to navigate it. Having some core basic business principles being integrated into nonprofit education would be amazing.

Crucial skills for social impact leaders



Grimes

Long term I think there needs to be a blend of junior aspirational folks as well as some senior people who can see the big picture and understand the links that are necessary to getting the philanthropy work done with policy and with government—state, local, and national.



Isaacs-Lowe

The talent we look for is not just people who have experience in the nonprofit world, but people who have environmental science backgrounds, because as we think about our environmental management system – the reporting of it and scenario analysis around what that means for risk and opportunities for the company – we need that kind of expertise. We also need expertise on financial reporting because we comply with TCFD and SASB and all of those other reporting frameworks. I think it's very diverse in terms of the talent and, if they're not on the CSR team, they are going to be integral to the CSR strategy for an enterprise.

Another thing I would mention is the increased interest in these roles. About 24 months ago I had an opening in the team, and my boss said, "I've been looking for a VP of Finance for two months, and the job market's tight and you're never going to be able to find somebody." I posted the opportunity on my team and in 48 hours I had 150 resumes. That's an important marker to understand what the incoming pipeline cares about.

The business knowledge is crucial too. For me, those discussions started because I was moving from a P&L role to one that wasn't, and that was an inflection point for me to consider in the context of my career, but it was also an important negotiation for me. The first thing was securing my compensation structure: it was important for me to still have a compensation structure that sort of reflected a P&L role, which meant there was a fixed component and a variable component that was based very much on quantitative goals and objectives.

Heidrick & Struggles' perspective

Finding effective leadership in these sectors has never been more critical, which is why nonprofit, social enterprise, and education executive search services are necessary for an organization's growth and impact. The emergence of new technologies and the creation and expansion of these markets requires aggressive, strategic organizational leadership paired with strong financial acumen, as the participants in our discussion underlined. As more organizations consider their impact on global and local communities, and roles in corporate philanthropy and social responsibility proliferate, it's important to understand what leadership capabilities and experience matter for success.

With a network of experts connecting executives from Chicago to Shanghai, Heidrick & Struggles brings global reach with local relevance providing the most comprehensive leadership strategy expertise in the industry. Our global team approach ensures the best, most appropriate consultants participate in every assignment regardless of location.

The organizations we serve work at the vanguard of some of the most pressing issues facing our societies: from climate change and sustainability, to financial inclusion, to expanding opportunities for young people, women, and communities of color to reach their fullest potential. Our clients represent a diverse group of organizations bringing progress to bear in their communities. Our experts also work across industries as more organizations integrate social responsibility and philanthropy executives into their leadership teams to ensure their organizations accelerate performance while fulfilling their responsibilities to make a positive imprint on the world.

Using every means at our disposal, we collaborate with experts in our global network and leverage our own proprietary resources to identify the right person for an organization and creating customized leadership solutions for future success.

Leadership contacts

J.J. Cutler

J.J. Cutler is a partner in Heidrick & Struggles' Philadelphia office and managing partner of the Social Impact Practice. He specializes in CEO, C-suite, and board searches for operating nonprofits, foundations, philanthropies, and institutions of higher education across a range of policy and program areas including health and human services, education, environment, economic development, and poverty elimination.

Jackie Gallagher Zavitz

Jackie Gallagher Zavitz is the partner-in-charge of Heidrick & Struggles' Philadelphia office and a member of the Social Impact Practice. She focuses on searches for leadership transitions in higher education, nonprofit organizations, foundations, and corporate clients.